

Hardy Orchids for Victoria Gardens

Many of us know that the orchids we usually see for sale in the local stores are from tropical countries. Most of these are also growing as epiphytes – clinging to trees. That is why they are planted in strange potting mixes like bark, charcoal, moss, Styrofoam pieces and similar materials.

There is a large group of orchids that grow in the ground, like “regular” plants. The majority of them come from temperate zones, where these plants can go dormant through the winter and only re-grow their tops during summer, like most perennial garden plants. For many of us, it is a surprise to find out that there are approximately 200 different orchid species originating in North America; most of them are terrestrial.

Other orchids coming from cooler climates for sale in garden stores come from Europe and Asia. Some of these even are man-made crosses (hybrids) which are often easier to grow than the original species. We have to realize that each plant species has evolved in its natural home environment, be that wet or dry, sunny or shady, in alkaline soil or acid soil and so on. It is very often nearly impossible to duplicate the original environment for wild orchid species in our gardens. I must therefore discourage you from digging up wild orchids (and other plants) to try to raise them in “Captivity”. They will live only for a few years (at most) and then give up and die. As plant lovers, we don’t want to be guilty of that! One major reason for their eventual demise is the fact that orchids need to grow with a good supply of their symbiotic partners in their soil, which are different fungus species.

On the other hand, if you are very concerned about keeping a store-bought, terrestrial orchid alive, you can try keeping it in its pot and only setting it in the garden without really planting it.

Some of our native orchids which you cannot successfully grow away from their homes for various reasons are:

- Calypso bulbosa – the Fairy Slipper
- Pogonia ophioglossoides from Eastern N.A.
- Spiranthes species - Ladies Tresses and others
- Platanthera species – many different names
- Orchis species – Broadleaf orchid.
- Corallorhiza species - Coral roots
- Cephalanthera austinae – the Phantom orchid

Other North American native orchids, which you can buy in nurseries, can live in your gardens for a while, some of the showier ones are:

- Cypripedium parviflorum and its varieties – Yellow Lady Slippers
- Please be advised that the name Cyp. calceolus only applies to the European ones.
- Cypripedium reginae and other lady slippers plus their hybrids
- Goodyera species – Rattlesnake orchids

There are other hardy terrestrial orchids (species & hybrids) originating in Europe, Africa and Asia:

Some of these have names like Bletilla, Calanthe, Dactylorhiza and Pleiones, the latter ones need a completely dry winter rest – their tubers have to go totally dormant. There is one orchid species from England, which has successfully established itself in North America; it is called Epipactis helleborine. This plant was brought to North America by early settlers as a cough remedy. Now you can find it (in BC) in many dry places, roadsides and wooded places, mostly in sunny sites. It comes in green, white, rose and lilac, smells of Vanilla and the stems can grow to three feet tall; the flowers are about 2 cm wide. By the way, a plant called “The great Alaska Bog Orchid” is not an orchid but an Impatiens.

It is advisable to purchase mature plants; seedlings present too many challenges for the amateur. There are several local garden centres which may have wild orchids for sale, in season; on Saltspring Island, there is Thimble Farm Nursery. I have learned that those species that come from areas close by, will have a better chance of succeeding in our gardens than those that originate in soils and climates very different from ours.

You can find all sorts of information on the internet. The Canadian Orchid Congress is an excellent site, specifically for Canadian growers. There are also a good number of books available and it would be wise to first read about plants you may wish to try. Then you will also realize that your growing environment may suit some kinds better than others.

The majority of our wild orchids need some good sunlight, good humusy soil and excellent drainage. Also – since they come from areas that experience cool to cold seasons, do not keep them in your warm greenhouse.

I want to remind you that when you see wild orchids in their natural habitat, and there are many more than the few (more showy species) that I have mentioned today. Please do not dig them up! Take pictures instead.

In closing, I encourage you to join the Victoria OS to learn more about orchids – we have a very extensive library for our members. We also have a show coming up in March, this year it will be at the hall of Our Lady of Fatima on Elk Lake Drive, across from the Commonwealth Pool.

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